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ABSTRACT

This speech addresses the educational needs of gifted children in the context of the existing educational system's philosophy and various reform efforts. It first examines the doctrine of progress, suggesting that important educational change is glacial and much of what purports to be educational change is ephemeral. It claims that the present prime directive of our educational system is to socialize job holders. Such reform movements as "authentic assessment" are seen to be more efforts to hold schools accountable to government than true examples of educational change. An alternative view is offered, which states that: (1) progress along the path of improvement is uncertain; (2) schooling tries to make people useful, but ends by dumbing them down; (3) good schooling entails enlightenment; and (4) education is a process of liberation that does not require schooling. It is concluded that teachers of gifted students need to see their prime mission as care of students' intellect, rather than development of their hypothetical usefulness. The existing "one best system" for all students is seen as in decline and suffering from an epidemic of "thoughtlessness" which can only be countered by an emphasis on thoughtfulness in the education of the gifted. (Contains seven references.) (DB)

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Taking the Bull by the Horns of a Dilemma

Keynote Address for Tennessee Association for the Gifted

Nashville, TN
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Taking the Bull by the Horns of a Dilemma

This talk is going to be kind of philosophical. Don't panic. I'm not going to use the words "metaphysics" or "ontology" even once. I do want to talk about the reason we most often claim to care for the development of talent and how that differs from what we ought to be saying.

Typically in gifted education we say that the whole business of "why" is considered to be obvious--the gifted are our most valuable national resource. Even if we don't believe this rationale, we feel bound to shut up about our objections, because otherwise we'll never get any money.

Our dilemma is that when we get money on this basis, we inevitably waste it. Not only do the ends not justify the means in this case, bad ends lead to bad means.

People with passionately justifiable concerns about inequality and injustice tell us that gifted education is elitist and nonsubstantive--the sort of fun and games to which all children ought to be entitled. I think these critics are right, and I hope you'll give me a chance to show you why. It's not a pretty picture.

But before anyone--including me--starts to feel belittled, bedeviled, or befuddled, let's freely admit and forgive each other our imperfections. First of all, what I have to say isn't going to be as clear to you as I would like it to be. Second, the only work I've ever done that is harder than teaching is putting up hay. The

work of a teacher is never done, and the context in which it takes place (school) is usually troubled.

Actually, the farmers for whom I worked were a lot more appreciative of my meager hay-making talents than any school administrator of my more substantial teaching talents.

Perhaps farmers are just a more desperate lot than school administrators. But experience tells me the opposite is true--no one is more desperate than school administrators.

And farmers know better than most school administrators just what they want and just where they're coming from. They know, in fact, just what their boots are covered with.

We can learn from them, both you and me. Walking in that stuff is the way of the world, and we're lucky to be here for that purpose. Maybe you will wake up tomorrow and find this talk all over your shoes. If so, brush it off and continue your walk through this world.

Another warning before I get into the thick of things: this talk does not dwell on the gifted per se. Education is something everyone does for oneself, the whole expensive, over-formalized apparatus of schooling notwithstanding.

One of the things we fight against, on behalf of education, is the rigidness of that one-best-system of schooling. We demand special education for the gifted, not because the gifted are so much more wonderful than all other children, but because the system of schooling gets in the way of their education.

But schooling is terrible for everybody else, too, at least in

most of the places I know. And this goes for teachers as well as for students.

So it's very important that we question ourselves about what sort of true education might be enacted in schools. Whatever we decide, however, will affect those students who are evidently most able.

So, suspend your disbelief. Turn up your tolerance for ambiguity. What follows will ask you to consider with me a lot of issues that are not so obviously connected to gifted education. The connections will become somewhat more--but not completely--clear along the way. One point to remember is that these connections are usually obscured by our attempts to make gifted children appear more wonderful than anyone else. People who work with retarded children make the same claim. In both cases--with the gifted and the retarded--the claims are sentimental rationalizations to help us do the difficult work we have chosen. That's OK, but we should not confuse sentimentality and reason.

* * * * *

Are you all familiar with that famously cynical French expression, it might be Voltaire's for all I know, that goes like this:

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"?

That translates, "The more it changes, the more it's the same thing." Whoever coined this expression, it appears in some ways to apply to American schooling, doesn't it?

Think about it: The more schooling changes, the more it's the same thing. Whatever might that mean? And what does it have to do with gifted education?

One thing it might mean is that schooling never changes, no matter what zany schemes the foolish reformers dream up. And so, we will never have any sort of appropriate schooling for our most talented students, of our most talented students, or--god bless us--by our most talented students. As I said, yesterday, our most talented students are all on their way to becoming white male genetic engineers.

Let's face it: not much has changed since the invention of schooling. The kids in ancient Babylonia had to sit still, shut up, and listen to the teacher. They got "paddled" a lot.

Sure--we've made a great deal of progress in 3,000 years. Today kids no longer sit on the floor; they don't use clay tablets any more. And isn't it interesting that paddling is still so commonplace?

This is the sort of perception that causes some people to doubt the very possibility of progress. They have a good point.

Christopher Lasch--an interesting but rather long-winded sociologist--has written a book about this point, a book about the end of progress. It's called The True and Only Heaven. This title is actually an allusion to a story, "The Celestial Railroad," by

Nathaniel Hawthorne--the same guy who, in the nineteenth century, wrote one of the all-time most-censored books in the high school curriculum (The Scarlet Letter).

Railroads--as in the title of the Hawthorne story--were, of course, the big symbol of progress during the nineteenth century. Hawthorne was being wry when he put forward the image of taking a train to heaven. At present, I think we have gospel songs that use the metaphor. They don't carry at all the same impact as the Hawthorne story, because--with us--railroads are not a progressive, but a nostalgic symbol.

But Hawthorne understood what was afoot culturally, way back then, before industrialization really got underway in this country. People were giving up the idea that anything might be sacred, that anything might endure in importance for more than a decade. Progress--real, honest-to-goodness material perfection right here in the almost-best of almost-possible worlds--was right around the corner, brother.

Therefore, one of the things that French expression might suggest to us is that progress itself can be a kind of salvation. In a world that no longer really believes in ideas of enduring importance, progress in the material world becomes a kind of salvation.

This is a science fiction kind of deal, right? When we screw up this planet completely, we'll all be able to emigrate to another one. Progress will save us, particularly technological progress.

The dark side of this new-age myth, however, is that maybe--

somewhere out there--is a more progressive planet than us. Maybe they're on the way here, right now. If we're the primitives, maybe that won't turn out too well for us.

So maybe progress will be our damnation, rather than our salvation.

Way too often, we assume that progress is something "we" have and something they don't--whether "they" happen to live in Africa, in Asia, on some other planet.

And, when you think about it, this is a question true-believers always argue about: who among us really is saved? Executives, workers, or peasants? Blacks, Whites, Mestizos? Men or women? Prostitutes, housewives, or angels? Christians? Jews? Buddhists?

Unfortunately, the doctrine of progress cannot specify whom it will save. It's much easier for us--if we keep our eyes open--to specify the victims of progress. At one time the assumption was that white people, at least, were safe. Now we're not too sure that humankind is safe.

Perhaps we have put our faith in progress because we believe we can at least count on progress to endure, no matter how rapid and how crazy are the changes that progress brings. "The more it changes, the more it stays the same" then means: "The more progress changes, the more progress stays the same." Surely, in this exploration of meaning, we have now arrived at something true.

This interpretation is of an entirely different order from our blithe assumption that schooling never changes. Here, we have the

complicated idea that the unchangeable essence of progress is change, perpetual, relentless, merciless, and remorseless change. So long as everything remains in constant flux, we're safe in the arms of progress. Now that's a comfort in a godless world.

About now, you'll be wondering what church I do go to. The answer is: I'm not talking about organized religion at all. I'm not talking about divinity. I am talking about things of this world that are so important they had better endure for decades, for centuries, even for millennia. Because these sort of things--are so very important, they will, in fact, endure, though never with ease. Often, in fact, they will have false champions.

There is a paradox here: though these things are in constant peril, they manage to survive, and cannot, not ever, be exterminated so long as people remain alive. These things concern the life of the mind, and they are somehow inherent in the human condition. What any generation of humans does, though, can serve either to contract or expand the life of the mind. Prolonged periods of contraction produce what we call "dark ages." At such times, people don't even dream of progress. The final part of this talk will have something more to say about the life of the mind.

For now, let us note that the idea that progress is some kind of salvation also applies to schooling, for, really, the idea that schooling never changes just isn't correct. Every other memo from the central office and from the state department promises that change, lasting change this time for sure, is indeed afoot. The state of Tennessee-West-Virginia-Arkansas-Wyoming-Idaho is a state

on the move, led by the education governor, what-iz-name. Schooling: thy face is reform, in the name of science, progress, and national salvation.

The ceaseless process of educational change though, is of two sorts (whether "truly" progressive, or not): glacial, on the one hand, and ephemeral, on the other hand. The glacial changes are the ones we tend not to see real well, so let me bring them into focus first.

We're like that ice-age hunter that popped out of the glacier in Switzerland. We don't know how we got into it, we don't know where it's going, and when we get there we <u>certainly</u> won't know it. No wonder the truth escapes us most of the time.

These glacial changes, changes that trap us educators like that lost hunter in the ice, include things like:

- o the feminization of teaching
  (to make mass schooling cheap);

- o the immortal cult of scientific management
  (to make cheap schooling efficient); and--most important of all,

- o the socialization of job-holders and of the society of job-holding
  (to make cheap schooling essential).

I'd like you also to notice something else. The first two changes made schooling cheap; this last change--socializing job-holders--makes it so cheap it becomes valuable. Another paradox; let me explain.

What we've got with this final change is a qualitative change. We've changed the numbers so much, that the name of the game has changed. At one time, virtually nobody went to school. Originally, "public education" meant education that went on outside the influence of a private tutor who lived with a wealthy family.

To this day, and on this basis, the English call their most elite private schools "public schools." Why bother with a tutor, when you can both provide a suitable education AND get the little monsters off the grounds of the estate?

How far we've come! Today not only does everybody go to school, everybody has to go to school. Man, that's progress! Look--heaven is waiting for us just beyond those boxes of new computers.

Well, maybe not--maybe there is a river in the way, the river Jordan, maybe, and maybe the water is wide. I'm not certain any of us--or any of our students--can cross that river by jumping a few computers.

No, I'm certain of the opposite. For the most part, the computers will get in the way. I've got two computers in my office, and it's all I can do to keep my head above water, believe me.

So we have these very interesting glacial changes that relate to all sorts of meanings, meanings so big they are very difficult to look squarely in the eye.

But you say, for instance:

> The feminization of teaching, the fascism of scientific management, the socialization of job-holders--c'mon, you've got to be kidding! Big deal! The superintendent just lost the election, my principal's husband wants my job, the parents of these kids don't know what they want, and the kids in my caseload want everything for nothing. Gimme a break!

Our preoccupation with these very real concerns--the concerns of our daily grind--are why we are so enchanted by the never-never land of the second sort of change--ephemeral change. For such changes, we consider, are the real signs by which progress makes itself manifest to us. It's like having a vision or hearing the voice of god.

It's also a fancy way of saying that you know that you're on the band wagon when they stick a flute in your hands.

What? You don't know which end of the flute is up, or if a flute has an up end? Not to worry: no one's listening anyhow. Next week you get a kazoo, that should be easier.

The ephemeral sort of change is what disgusts and fascinates us most. We all flock to it, in droves--me too, I'm no different, I can only talk about these things as a sort of confession in the

tradition of Educationists Anonymous.

We binge on reforms, and it makes us sick. Until it's time for the next binge. By then we've recovered our boredom, and we're ready for literally anything:

- site-based-decision-avoidance;
- higher-order-drinking-skills;
- systemic meta-reform;
- partial quality mismanagement;
- curriculum recycling ("get the plastic bags, hon"); and
- values obfuscation.

Yes--values obfuscation, mark my word it's the next big fad. After all, hiding your true values is a really adult skill. It's only too obvious to most of us that teenagers need training.

It's a dizzy three-ring circus, the ephemeral fads of reform, with pirouetting elephants and donkeys to boot. And how very nimble they are, the elephants especially.

We can never quite identify the ringmaster, however. But--quite possibly--we have met the enemy before... you know the rest.

So what are we? What, as Aristotle would ask, is our nature? Are we boldly going where no one has gone before? What is our "prime directive"?

I can't answer the first three questions, though I evidently suspect we are going around in circles. I have an idea about the answer to the last question, though--our prime directive.

Our prime directive--the prime directive for all educators, with special pitfalls for gifted education--is to socialize job-holders. This prime directive, in fact, is the most recent glacier to receive our poor, frozen bodies.

It truly freezes my soul. Notice that the business of socializing job-holders has to do with the aims of education, or rather the aims of schooling, because there's a sharp difference in education and schooling.

Right?

Just maybe, education and schooling are opposites.

Imagine it as an analogy on the SAT:

I've got a transparency, because analogies are tough:

EDUCATION : SCHOOLING :: _____ : IMPRISONMENT

A. PUNISHMENT

B. ENLIGHTENMENT

C. LIBERATION

You can all guess what I think the right answer is. I mean, you probably don't even have to read the stem. But let's remember that this is an SAT question. That changes things.

Besides demonstrating how dangerous analogies are for both conventional and <u>un</u>conventional minds, this one really does present some difficult choices, at least as a test item.

In fact, the so-called "correct" answer varies with your assessment of the whole educational landscape.

But this, after all, is the SAT. Probably those folks who make up the SAT are looking for answer "A," on the presumption that education and schooling are very much alike. Schooling is the means of education, for instance, just as imprisonment is a means of punishment.

Or maybe schooling and punishment are simply more usual forms of the extreme cases--education, on one hand, and imprisonment, on the other. This last insight is pretty subtle--we've got a four-part continuum from best to worst. It's very scientific, very neutral.

Even the subtle minds of the brightest students will be able to make sense of this analogy. The group of SAT candidates will, of course, include some divergent gifted kids who will naturally take a somewhat different view, but they're won't be enough of them to skew the norming sample.

Thank goodness none of the kids who take the SAT actually have jobs in schools. Nope, most of the kids will be in the dark on this one. This question will work for the kids, no matter how faulty its relationship to the real world.

Those of us who do work in schools, however, know from experience that there is a big difference between schooling and education. Some of us even suspect that education just isn't the goal in all schools. A few of us--maybe--think that the goal of schooling generally is to make kids stupid. So--wherever we fall on this continuum of skepticism--we'd probably move on to options B and C.

And here we have a real problem. Both B and C reflect the idea that schooling and imprisonment might just have something substantive in common--compulsory attendance, for instance. So far, so good.

But given this insight, which choice, we ask ourselves, is the right answer? What are these ever-so-clever guys and gals in Princeton, New Jersey, looking for?

It might make it easier if we assumed this test were no longer the SAT, but the National Teachers Exam, the NTE.

Now that we have a frame of reference, our job is much simpler. Let's start at the beginning, with education. Scholars that we be, we all know that education means something like "to lead out of." And prisons are dark places that one enters.

We've got it now. The right answer for the NTE--yes, it's "B," enlightenment.

This answer acknowledges a complex relationship between confinement, schooling, and education--but one with a happy outcome. That's what the NTE folks are after: putting a happy face on the whole cheap, efficient, national salvation project of schooling.

This is a test for teachers, get it? Through the institution of schooling, teachers "are supposed to" enlighten their students, give them knowledge, show them the truth. Yup, taking the NTE at 23 you know more about schooling than you did at 17, but not as much as your gonna know by the time you're 35.

You couldn't see them, but I had scare quotes around the words

"are supposed to." "Supposed to" is a funny construction when you stop to examine its literal meaning.

Who does all this supposing, is what I want to know. The expression itself never says.

For example, "Juan is supposed to read in English." Who in his or her right mind would suppose that Juan--just arrived from Colombia--reads in English? What we've got with all this supposing is a set of norms, presented as if they were unquestionable ground rules for action in the real world.

Some of these norms may be good, some bad, but let us admit--after all--that we do have brains, and that we need not suppose any damn thing if we have a mind not to. We can look, we can ask questions, we can insist on some answers. No--whenever you're "supposed" to do something, someone else is making the suppositions.

So, you see, when we're taking this NTE thing, we're not going to be asking any questions of--or insisting on any answers from--those clever girls and boys in Princeton. No--we remember--they're asking all the questions. Yes, indeedy, we're going to SUPPOSE exactly what we're SUPPOSED TO. Our jobs depend on it. Answer B is the one we're SUPPOSED to give: yes, enlightenment, that's the ticket, surely, if you're a teacher in the one-best-system.

But those of us--like John Gatto in New York, teacher of the year in both the city of that name and that otherwise fine state (I'm entitled to cast this slur as a former victim of the Big Apple)--those of us like him, I say, may tire of this expensive

testing apparatus where part of the deal is for us, as adults even, to second-guess all these questionable suppositions. It's not, after all, very "authentic," is it?

Actually, I'm not against some of the tests that the reformers no longer regard as truly "authentic." In fact, I don't think authentic assessment has a whole lot to do with those of us interested in gifted kids. This, in fact, has something to do with the ideas of enlightenment and liberation that we're trying so hard to get hold of.

You've got to read between the lines to figure this one out, because what they're calling authentic assessment does make sense instructionally. Get kids writing essays and papers and stories (actually, even a few paragraphs would be a good start in many places). Get kids explaining mathematical ideas, their reasons for approaching a certain problem a certain way; have them explain why the square of the hypotenuse is the sum of the squares of the other two sides. This is good:

> Let them compose poems, songs, 3-volume novels, 6-hour operas;
> let them make experiments, collect data, explain results, patent their own genes;
> let them analyze, synthesize, create, elaborate, and evaluate things and ideas ad nauseam!

The trouble is, letting kids do this stuff isn't enough.

This sort of "freedom" is no freedom at all, if somebody isn't around to teach these things.

Remember that kids aren't receptacles to have knowledge poured into them, right? We're all supposed to have accepted this viewpoint by now.

What many of us fail to recognize, however, is that this invalid process (the pouring into) is equally invalid backwards. Giving kids "freedom" doesn't allow wonderful stuff to flow from them without instruction.

(Incidentally, I hope you're beginning to see the point of this digression: we're going to be coming back to liberation soon enough, once we start talking about freedom!)

But the people who are promoting "authentic assessment" are real hopeful that it will somehow lead to authentic instruction.

One problem I have with this view is that it makes time flow backwards.

Ah, we're going to assess what we're not yet doing, what maybe the system of schooling is set up not to do, in the hope that the thing we've already tried to do but just authentically assessed and found not to have happened will somehow happen anyway.

What gives people this hope? They assume that norm-

referenced, standardized tests make the curriculum stupid, and on the same basis, smart tests will make instruction smart. What's wrong with this idea? It's childish! It's based on magic! Time doesn't flow backwards, water doesn't run up hill, and better instruction really ought to precede better tests. The tests didn't make the curriculum stupid--100 years of perpetual reform did the trick.

Even if their logic is a little shaky, let's admit that maybe these folks have good intentions. Surely, they've got the best interests of kids at heart.

In sharp distinction to all this instructional worthiness, however, authentic assessment is <u>not</u> about kids. That's because authentic assessment is going to be <u>so</u> very expensive. And when it comes to kids, almost any expense is too great.

Family leave? Dream on.

Affordable day-care? Forget it.

Accessible health-care for everyone? Shut up and go away.

Indeed, according to Eric Hanushek, it's just pointless to spend any more money on schooling--probably on anything. Money has no systematic effect on results. The wealthy just have a lot of money because they know best what to do with it.

The equity suit here in Tennessee--it's a waste of time. Who needs buses? Who needs toilet paper? You can learn a lot about innovation if there's no toilet paper.

So if you think an individual IQ test is expensive, just wait 'til you get the bill for "authentic" assessments. Authentic assessment is going to be so expensive that it won't be used to assess children at all--we'll use it to assess schools, instead. We'll do this by taking a sample. In fact, these authentic assessments probably won't be reliable enough to identify gifted kids or to inform programming decisions.

That, in a nutshell is why authentic assessment is not so very authentic: it's not about children, it's about institutions, particularly about holding schools accountable to governments.

The idea of "accounting" gives the game away, though not too many people seem to notice this fact. The basic axiom is: "The government wants what it pays for." The corollary is: "If you can't do it, we'll get the private schools to do it instead. They'll do it for less, too!" That's great, right, because Eric Hanushek and his ilk have already proven that money doesn't count any way.

This apparent digression brings us back to our analogy. Maybe "enlightenment" in the context of schooling is even more complicated than we had at first thought. What about turning schooling over to the private sector? What about the fact that we don't really care too much in general about kids and families? Does this have anything to do with education, schooling, and imprisonment?

Suppose, for a moment, that we suspected that enlightenment were not the real goal of schooling. Maybe schooling--as opposed

to education--isn't really for kids. Maybe it's for something else. For instance, the national macroeconomic circumstance.

Listen to what Gatto, that much-honored classroom teacher has to say about his enlightenment, an enlightenment no one, certainly, wanted him to receive:

> I began to wonder, reluctantly, whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing [my students] down. Was it possible I had been hired not to enlarge children's power, but to diminish it? That seemed crazy on the face of it, but slowly I began to realize that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the age-segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

Dependent behavior might, for instance, have something to do with blindly following the suppositions of others.

Actually, I think many of us have had this strange perception.

But note that Gatto uses the term "schooling" in a way that fits the analogy. It's not just a question of compulsory attendance. It's a question of a system designed to confine children to thoughtlessness and inaction.

If you were thinking like Gatto, then, you'd conclude that

"LIBERATION" was the correct answer. In this interpretation, the aim of "education" is to lead children out of the confinement that schooling imposes. Education and schooling are in essential opposition--like liberation and imprisonment.

By now I hope you have some sense that our prime directive--socializing job holders--just might have some problems. Let's take a look at just a few.

First of all--as many of us understand--socializing job-holders entails some hefty baggage. It means that we accept the status quo of existing patterns of employment, existing ways of organizing work, and existing conceptions of what work is for. It means we accept the proposition that having a good job is the path to living the good life. It also means that we think the good life concerns the consumption of actual material "goods"--high-definition TVs, swimming pools, whatever.

This is not living the good life. This is what I call "living the goods life."

Living the goods life, on one hand, and job-holding, on the other, make up a single way of life. One goes from the job to the store, to home--where one very quickly uses up the goods thus acquired. And we are in constant danger of using one another up in this fashion, right? Kids, I hear, kill for trendy coats in some neighborhoods.

Worst of all, for us as educators, is the thoughtlessness of this sort of existence. Perhaps you've heard that the philosopher Hannah Arendt equated evil with thoughtlessness. This insight came

to her as she watched Adolf Eichmann testify at his trial. "This guy doesn't have a clue about the actions for which he was responsible," she thought.

This is the second set of problems associated with our prime directive. By accepting it, we indicate our willingness--as educators, of all people--to relinquish our right to make our own meanings, to help young people make their own meanings, to become whatever it is in our natures to become without regard to the kinds of jobs we hold or the kinds of cars we drive.

When the Army said "Be all you can be," it, of course, really meant "Learn to do a job for us." The Army advertising campaign was so successful, however, because it played on the frustrated ambitions of young people without college plans. I've just learned, incidentally, that the Army is no longer accepting the GED in lieu of high school graduation. So, if you <u>don't</u> want to go to college, you'd at least better stay in school to get socialized for the Army. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The third reason for questioning the prime directive is the practical one I raised yesterday. Going to college is no longer a guarantee even that one will be able to live "the <u>goods</u> life." Important things go on in this world that just don't pay very well, and teaching is a prime example.

I also think of all the devoted artists and musicians and writers I know. Most of them keep body and soul together with odd little jobs. The meaning of <u>their</u> lives, however, depends hardly at all on their jobs, which, even when related to their arts, pay

pitiably little.

Forty years ago, Norbert Wiener--a child genius in his own right--wrote a little book called The human uses of human beings. He made a prediction relevant to this point: the widespread use of computers, he wrote, would lead to a society in which no "useful" work--in the strictly practical sense of the term--work would be required of human beings. Woh--that should be scary in a society of job-holders!

The prime directive is the bull that we confront as educators interested in helping the most evidently able kids that our system of schooling can find to realize--by which I mean "make real"--their academic potential. Our dilemma, of course, consists in the fact that we have but little choice other than to labor within that system. I suggest that the only way to proceed is by not doing what we're SUPPOSED TO.

Our hope is circumscribed by just these things:

- our ability to see through the bull,
- our sensitivity to the distinction between evident as opposed to hidden potential,
- our imperfect understanding of the significance of academic potential, and
- the severe limitations of our system of schooling.

I say "hope" because dilemmas involve compromises. Compromises can be renegotiated, so long as we understand the basis

of our dilemmas.

A dilemma (unlike a paradox--which presents contradictory evidence to the mind), consists of the need to choose between among equally unsatisfactory alternatives. One may, indeed, say that life is a perpetual dilemma. To be or not to be is a question with a very long history, and the general conclusion among responsible parties is that preservation of life is the highest attainable good. So resolving the dilemma of life itself, according to philosophy and religion, cannot consist of death. Further, this conclusion condemns us humans to a life that is an endless <u>series</u> of dilemmas--an endless litany of less than happy choices between less than adequate alternatives.

We're now in a position to deal with our dilemma--that if we argue a special usefulness for gifted kids in order to get funded, we will inevitably waste the funds we get.

One way to get a clear view of what's happening is to combine Gatto's and Wiener's suppositions. If we do this, w get an interesting--and very divergent--view of the prime directive. Schooling, we might infer, dumbs students down because good jobs are getting more and more rare.

Do we want to help gifted students accept this state of affairs? Is that all there is to life?

The answer seems to me to be clearly "No." But first we've got to get away from the idea that gifted children constitute any sort of national treasure, any special "usefulness" in this turbulent and confusing world. We can do this in part by

acknowledging that the progress of humankind toward perfection, or at least along the path of improvement, is uncertain at best. Very talented individuals have no more certain a role in the improvement of the world than other individuals. Nor are they any more entitled to good jobs than other people.

Let me sum up the main points that have brought us thus far:

- o progress is uncertain;
- o schooling tries to make people useful, but ends by dumbing them down;
- o good schooling entails enlightenment;
- o education is a process of liberation that does not require schooling.

There is one other point, and it pertains to us. We are all caught up in the system of schooling. We don't have the luxury of regarding the whole business as somebody else's problem.

This, really, is the essence of our dilemma. Caring for very able kids, we have struck a convenient compromise with the premises of the system in which we are caught. We need to renegotiate.

A very thoughtful educator--Larry Cuban--advises us to forget about solving problems. We should, he says, concentrate on managing dilemmas. The situations we face as educators, in his view, cannot ever be "solved." They are part of the human condition.

It is <u>past</u> time, in fact, for us to renegotiate the compromise

that embodies our dilemma. Let's remember that just because we work in schools doesn't mean we must submit at every moment to the requirements of the one-best-system. Although working in schools is not the same as providing schooling, the schooling of very able students concerns us because we work in schools.

What's the alternative? The moment of truth has--finally--arrived.

> The alternative for us--among all teachers--is care for the intellect, rather than for the hypothetical usefulness, of gifted students.

To many people this sounds very cold. Intellect! Brrrrr. How bloodless!

Aren't people a complex of mind, affections, and spirit? Doesn't "liberation" release all these qualities?

These observations are correct. But they do not suggest that care for the intellect is in any way unbalanced. Intellect is bound up with all those qualities. Let me explain.

If the one-best-system of schooling actually succeeds in dumbing students down--particularly dumbing down the gifted (and we know how this actually works from minute to minute)--it does so not only by hobbling the mind, but by chilling the affections, and by breaking the spirit. If you are in any doubt about this fact, watch what happens to bright children as they enter school. Many of them in my experience become sullen and tense. By the end of

first grade their spirits have been broken. Kids are tough, though, and some of them recover. I think we can help.

I'm going to read two particularly compelling brief quotes from observers who wrote about these issues, Jacques Barzun and Richard Hofstadter. Both of them are historians interested in education. Writing about the relationship of intellect to emotion, Barzun had this to say:

> Modern theory inverts the relation [between knowledge and care for children as children] and makes of subject-matter a device for correcting what the teacher thinks is wrong in a child's temperament.... The ... inversion assumes in each pupil the supremely gifted mind, which must not be tampered with, and the defective personality, which the school must remodel.
>
> (Barzun, 1959, pp. 101-103)

Barzun wrote this passage in 1959--almost 35 years ago. He was writing about the one-best-system, but he didn't know it because it hadn't been given that name yet.

The interesting thing about this passage is that it clearly reveals how vicious failure to care for the intellect is. Knowledge has no value of its own in this version of schooling. Its value depends on its usefulness in correcting defective personalities. And everyone is defective--you and me and all our

kin--and that is why we must endure our schooling. It's medicine. We hold our noses and swallow hard. In the end, we hope that we'll all do what we're supposed to.

Note that, in Barzun's view, knowledge itself justifies failure to attend to the intellect--the supremely gifted mind. This view helps explain the twisted way in which schooling dumbs children down. It uses knowledge against them. It makes knowledge into something evil, and something separate from everything else, especially emotion and spirit. Barzun's statement also explains the way in which very able students are dangerously diminished, if not crippled, by schooling. The more they learn, the more likely it is that people will conclude that the gifted are imprisoned in defective personalities. No wonder we conclude that the emotional needs of the gifted require more attention than their intellectual needs.

Caring for the intellect within the context of schooling is essential for the overall well-being of gifted children. It is, in fact, essential to their education. This observation applies to all children, of course, but especially to the gifted, because they, at least according to Barzun's logic, have the most to lose.

So much for the negative side of things. Hofstadter--who also wrote a long time ago--understood how intellect was connected with everything else. Here's what <u>he</u> had to say:

> Intellect needs to be understood not as some kind of a claim against the other human excellences for which a fatally high price must be paid, but rather as a complement to them without which they cannot be fully consummated.
>
> (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 46)

Far from being bloodless and chilly, intellect is a force without which the spirit and the affections cannot thrive. Look around this society--the society of America--and you will see appalling evidence of spiritual and emotional failure. This failure is, in large part, an intellectual failure. The one-best-system of schooling is, in the view of many, turning out to be the one-worst-system of schooling.

But you must remember that the source of this intellectual failing is not particular schools or particular teachers, but something deep in the heart of the society of job-holding. Schooling is merely one of the institutions that socializes job-holders in particular, and job-holding, in general. As a result, schools have been anti-intellectual places for a long time--as the quotes from Barzun and Hofstadter indicate.

This perception returns us to an idea introduced previously: thoughtlessness, which Hannah Arendt equated with evil. Whatever intellect is--and it surely differs from intelligence--it must first be thoughtful. And whatever the one-best-system of schooling

is, it is hardly ever thoughtful.

Obviously, there is much more to be said about this topic. Care for the intellect relates to the so-called "constructivist" view of learning. Language and discourse are very important, because language--both written and spoken, but particularly written language--is the tool of thought. Consider how little conversation occurs in the classrooms of the one-best-system and you will see what I mean. Consider how very seldom children are asked to write, and you will see what I mean.

It is very encouraging that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics puts a premium on thoughtful education in their new materials about curriculum. They insist that teachers and students must develop together instructional routines founded on both oral and written discourse. The documents from this group are quite amazing. Search them out if you have not yet seen them.

But there is a real danger as the one-best-system finally begins to crumble. The danger is that, because of our belief in progress, we expect improvement to result. Powerful social and cultural forces shape the way in which a society conducts schooling, and they will certainly come into play as the one-best-(or worst-) system changes.

Certainly, the predicted demise of the one-best-system of schooling does <u>not</u> entail the demise of the society of job-holders. That change--if it ever comes--will take longer, perhaps much longer.

For these reasons, only the most foolish optimist would assert

that schooling will improve so radically, so rapidly, and so completely that it will soon serve everyone so well that special arrangements for exceptional children will no longer be necessary.

But if Gatto, Barzun, and Hofstadter are right, lasting improvements to schooling that allow for the education of everyone may never materialize. This
insight should not be so depressing.

For one thing, we must begin to question our faith in progress. If we blindly believe that progress will solve our problems, we will never act to manage the persistent dilemmas that characterize the human condition.

We also need to acknowledge that no institution can supply education as if it were a commodity. People educate themselves because they have what the philosophers call "agency." They are not widgits on an assembly, students are not the "products" of schools, they are not objects. They are, in fact, people who can and will act on their own behalf, no matter what happens to them. The may go crazy, they may become homicidal or suicidal, but they will act as their own agents, for better or worse.

We have not been able to do enough to help, have we? Accidents, homicides, and suicides claim the most young lives. My contention is that thoughtlessness--failure to care for the intellect, in particular--contributes significantly to these rotten outcomes. Driver education, health education, individual therapy--no matter how excellent--all these are bandaids.

What we have in our society is an epidemic of thoughtlessness.

It's not an erosion of "family values," of the Protestant ethic, nor even the decline of Western Civilization. We no longer understand that thoughtfulness is the responsibility of individual agents.

We have expected that progress will, in effect, do our thinking for us. The knowledge of science--for example, the "science" of gifted education--will, we assume, accumulate virtually on its own. Improvement, we trust, will come about with no interference from us. In this scheme, I hope you can see, our thoughtfulness is not only not required, it is almost irrelevant. Too much thoughtfulness on our part will interfere with the progress created for us by the experts. And this principle applies almost universally in our society--from religion to philosophy to economics to politics to education.

Although this view is truly frightening, it represents only the results we have brought upon ourselves by remaking the dilemmas of the human condition into problems of technology. If we cannot become more widely thoughtful, as teachers, parents, and citizens, things will get worse with us.

Reversing what has taken place is a truly great challenge. And if you have followed the argument, you'll realize that this challenge cannot be met overnight; it is in fact, a project worthy of the effort of several generations of humans in all walks of life.

But think about it: There is no more logical place to begin to counter this epidemic than in schools, in our capacity as

thoughtful educators. And, within schools, one--but only one--logical place to begin the work of caring for the intellect is among our most evidently able students.

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EDUCATION : SCHOOLING :: _____ : IMPRISONMENT

A. PUNISHMENT

B. ENLIGHTENMENT

C. LIBERATION

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